

Confronting job precarity in Spanish tourism: The rise of the hotel housekeepers

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Since the 1960s, tourism has played a major role in Spanish capitalism; it has been mostly clustered around the Mediterranean coast and in the Canary Islands. Under General Franco's dictatorship (1939-1975), tourism was a key currency earner for the balance of payments and helped boost investment. Tourism has subsequently been closely linked to financialisation through the formation of real estate bubbles, especially after Spain joined the European Union (EU) in 1985. While the recent crisis deeply affected the Spanish economy after the burst of the real estate bubble, tourism has been booming again after a short stagnation period between 2008 and 2010. In spite of this, working conditions in the sector have deteriorated significantly, especially for hotel housekeepers. They have, in response, led one of the most significant social mobilisations in Spain.

A long history of attack on working conditions

Since tourism started developing under Franco, profits have been made on the back of widespread labour exploitation. This has however hardly been discussed, except for a few studies on the labour-tourism nexus during the years of Spanish developmentalism (Mandly, 1978) and in neoliberal times (Cañada, 2015).

After Franco's death in 1975, worker struggles took centre stage, focusing on basic social rights that had been denied under the dictatorship. In the context of the political and economic crisis of the 1970s, these struggles resulted in a set of labour reforms reflecting the emerging neoliberal dogma. In order to satisfy both the EU and capital, a succession of labour reforms were implemented between the 1980s and 2012 in order to reduce labour costs (Aragón, 2012).

The 2008 breakdown of the Spanish economy spread rapidly from the financial sector to the real economy with devastating effects on the working class. The government adopted bail-out programmes as well as adjustment policies entailing new labour reforms. The familiar rhetoric behind these reforms was that labour market rigidity and high labour costs stifled economic growth. In a context of high unemployment, the Conservative party passed the 2012 labour reform which increases flexibility, facilitates outsourcing, and eases dismissal. It also dismantles collective bargaining in a context where unions have traditionally been playing an influential role. All workers were subject to sectoral collective agreements that protected them from abuses. The reform replaces sectoral agreements with individualised bargaining at company level.

Crisis, tourism boom and the exploitation of hotel housekeepers

The crisis led to thousands of job losses and a skyrocketing of unemployment, which reached 26% in 2013. While job losses were concentrated in the construction and related sectors, a steady deterioration of employment quality has taken place in other sectors. This is the case of tourism that has at the same time experienced an extraordinary expansion, as international tourist arrivals in Spain grew from 58.6 million in 2007 to 75.6 million in 2016, benefiting inter alia from the decline of tourism in North Africa following terrorist attacks and armed conflicts.

Tourism work is tough and poorly paid. Hoteliers have furthermore taken advantage of the crisis to increase workloads, reduce wages, make contracts more insecure, and outsource. Hotel housekeepers have been heavily squeezed; they are one of the largest groups among hotel staff, representing between 20 and 30% of employees. They are mostly female, suffering from multiple forms of discrimination, where class, gender and race overlap, since many of them are immigrants from South America and the Caribbean, Eastern Europe and Morocco.

Hotel workloads have increased dramatically with little or no staff increase. Consequently, individual workloads have also increased in three key ways. Firstly, hotel housekeepers have to clean more rooms per day. Secondly, since average overnights per tourist have diminished, there is higher room rotation and therefore more work since rooms have to be cleaned for new guests. Thirdly, recent hotel refurbishments have introduced changes in bedrooms that make cleaning more time-consuming, such as showers with glass doors instead of curtains.

Those hotel maids who have not lost their job are afraid of being dismissed and usually accept these new conditions, while new employees are hired under even harsher conditions. As far as contracts are concerned, there has been a steady increase of temporary and part-time jobs, which make up most of the new outsourced jobs. The outsourced companies are not bound by the hospitality sectoral agreement, but by cleaning or company agreements, whose terms are typically less favourable. Those working under cleaning agreements thus receive a wage that is 40% lower than under the hotel agreement. Before the 2012 reform, all employees within a sector were covered by binding sectoral agreements. The reform destroyed that right and en-

couraged company-level agreements, resulting in a fragmentation of labour relations and undermining workers' organisational capacity (Cañada, 2016). Furthermore, corporate-driven education and training reforms have been associated with the spread of so-called training and work-experience contracts; the latter have been used widely (and illegally) by hoteliers to reduce labour costs through hiring people as 'trainees', who do the same work as a regular employee for a third of the salary or even with no salary. With this labour fragmentation, wages have dropped dramatically and many hotel cleaners have become "working poor".

Hotel housekeepers have complained that the quality of their work has deteriorated, affecting their professional dignity. They are also wary of deskilling because older workers have to leave their jobs as they cannot cope with the workload, thus running the risk of not contributing enough to receive their pension. On the other hand, young workers are recruited by multiservice companies with precarious contracts and their exchanges with other staff members are limited. A direct effect of workload intensification is visible in increased health problems, both physical and psychological. Cleaners often need to undergo surgery (e.g. for carpal tunnel syndrome) and typically take medication such as ibuprofen and anxiolytics to complete their working day. The capacity for collective organisation is seriously undermined and this accentuates job precarity.

The rise of the hotel housekeepers

In 2014, the International Union of Food workers (IUF) launched an international campaign for healthy, safe and dignified working conditions for hotel housekeepers. Labour unions and other organisations from several countries participated by engaging in a number of actions. In Spain, unions and activist research groups such as Alba Sud¹ joined the campaign and lambasted capital's narrative that tourism was driving economic recovery.

The Spanish campaign included personal testimonies distributed through social media in order to publicise the conflict (Cañada, 2015). At first, many hotel housekeepers identified with this visualisation of their problems and started to share colleagues' interviews and testimonies through social networks. Then, what had been approached as an individual situation became a collective conflict; hotel housekeepers who had met on social media created Facebook groups and later some of these turned real as they constituted organisations such as Las Kellys, Kellys Confederadas and Asociación de Camareras de Piso de Sevilla (Sevilla's Hotel Housekeepers). As a result of the campaign, unionised hotel cleaners, whose resistance had hitherto been isolated, gained greater confidence in their workplaces as well as in the unions. The relationships of the new collectives with labour unions have varied greatly, with some collectives closer to unions and others remaining autonomous. In spite of these differences, it is impressive to observe how workers' fear has mutated into collective empowerment.

As the working conflict gained visibility through social networks, the mass media started talking about it, giving it a national audience. The campaign then entered the political agenda prior to the national and regional elections of 2015. Left parties became involved in the campaign and incorporated the housekeepers' demands in their programmes, from abolishing the 2012 labour reform, to eliminating outsourcing, and securing early retirement. Unions and the new collectives have presented their demands for dignified hotel work to the European, Spanish and Regional Parliaments, among others.

The hotel cleaners' movement has been very diverse. Whereas some of its participants have a close relationship with unions, others are more independent. There has been tension on certain occasions among the collectives, resulting in sometimes diverse demands. Yet, beyond these differences, hotel cleaners have made their struggle visible and empowered themselves, thus making a crucial first step towards better working conditions. Their struggle also has a broader significance since it is about female workers' power and dignity.

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Footnote

See: <http://www.albasud.org/dossier/es/3/las-que-limpian-los-hoteles> (in Spanish).